

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DEBATES IN THE EARLY 'ABBASID PERIOD: The Cases of Timothy I and Theodore Abu Qurra

Hans Abdiel Harmakaputra

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Jakarta
Jl. Proklamasi no. 27, Jakarta, 10230
e-mail: hansharmakaputra@gmail.com

Abstrak: Perdebatan Muslim-Kristen Pada Awal Era Abbasiyah: Studi Kasus Era Timothy I dan Theodore Abu Qurra. Kekhalifahan Abbasiyah awal meninggalkan warisan penting dalam sejarah dunia, melalui gerakan penerjemahan pemikiran dan literatur Yunani ke dalam bahasa Arab. Era tersebut menjadi saksi berkembangnya diskursus antar-agama maupun debat keagamaan Islam dan Kristen. Artikel ini berupaya mendeskripsikan bagaimana kedua poin sejarah di atas berkorelasi dengan faktor lain seperti politik dan identitas keagamaan. Debat paling awal berlangsung antara khalifah al-Mahdi (755-785 M) dengan Timothy I (728-823 M). Perdebatan keduanya merupakan contoh pertama diskursus keagamaan era ini. Contoh berikutnya perdebatan khalifah al-Ma'mun (813-833 M) dengan Theodore Abu Qurra (755-830 M). Dengan mengetahui motif kedua khalifah dalam menyelenggarakan debat keagamaan, jaringan konteks periode tersebut akan dapat dipahami dengan lebih baik.

Abstract: The era of the early 'Abbasid caliphate made an important mark on the history of the world by the event of the Greek translation movement, i.e. the translation of Greek thoughts into the Arabic language. In addition to this development, the era also saw the flourishing of interreligious discourse, in both polemical literatures and religious debates, especially between Christians and Muslims. This article tries to describe how those two historical remarks are correlated under the light of other factors such as politics and religious identity. The earliest debate was happened between caliph al-Mahdi (r. 755-785 CE) and a Nestorian Catholicos, Timothy I (728-823 CE), as the first sample of religious discourses. The second one is the debate between the caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833 CE), who arranged many religious debates in his court, with Theodore Abu Qurra (755 – 830 CE), Bishop of Harran. By knowing the motives of the two caliphs who sponsored those events, readers would catch a better picture of the historical contexts of that time.

Keywords: Islamic history, Abbasid period, Muslims-Christian relation

Introduction

And our victorious King said: “It seems to me that you believe in a vacuous God, since you believe that He has a child.”—And I answered: “O King, I do not believe that God is either vacuous or solid, because both these adjectives denote bodies. If vacuity and solidity belong to bodies, and God is a Spirit without a body, neither of the two qualifications can be ascribed to Him....” At this our victorious King rose up and entered his audience chamber, and I left him and returned in peace to my patriarchal residence. (Timothy I)¹

On another occasion when Abu Qurrah made a telling point against the caliph himself and the Muslims grew angry at his presumed insolence, al-Ma'mun is made to say, “Abu Qurrah does not act in a hostile way toward us, so let not one speak to him ‘except for the best.’”²

The era of the early ‘Abbasid caliphate made an important mark on the history of the world by the event of the Greek translation movement, i.e. the translation of Greek thoughts into the Arabic language. In addition to this development, the era also saw the flourishing of interreligious discourse, in both polemical literature and religious debate, and especially between Christians and Muslims. The two quotations above are examples of the interreligious discourse of that time. The first quotation is from Timothy I (728-823), a Nestorian Catholicos of the Eastern Church. He wrote it after caliph al-Mahdi (r. 755-785) invited him to come and engage the caliph in religious debate. The latter describes a discussion Theodore Abu Qurra (c. 755 –c. 830), Bishop of Harran, joined at a debate sponsored by caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833), who arranged many religious debates. Mark N. Swanson says that the debate between al-Mahdi and Timothy I is an important remark for Christian-Muslim relations, not only because it was the earliest reported theological dialogue, but also because their topics and modes of argumentation would be used and developed in future Muslim-Christian discourse.³

The debates between caliph al-Mahdi and Timothy I occurred at the initiative of the caliph. Timothy I was a proficient Christian scholar who produced many theological pieces, including apologetic literature. He was fluent in various languages, e.g. Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.⁴ Unfortunately, the date of the debate is undetermined by scholars, but soon after

¹Alphonse Mingana, trans., “Timothy I, Apology for Christianity,” The Tertullian Project, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/timothy_i_apology_01_text.htm (accessed November 16, 2011).

²Sidney H. Griffith, “The Monk in the Emir’s Majlis: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, eds. H. Lazarus-Yafeh, et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), p. 43.

³Mark N. Swanson, “The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy,” in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, eds. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 248, 254.

⁴Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 45-46.

the event the caliph commissioned Timothy I to translate Aristotle's book *Topics* into Arabic.⁵ Similarly, the debate that involved Theodore Abu Qurra in the court of al-Ma'mun operated under the caliph's initiative, when al-Ma'mun was at war with Byzantium in 829.⁶

Those two events share some similarities. First, two gracious caliphs asked for an honest and open discussion on complex theological topics with prominent Christian theologians at that time. Second, there was a cordial atmosphere for interreligious knowledge exchange. Third, several important topics raised there would become "classic" by today standards for theological discourse between Christians and Muslims. This article, however, does not focus on the content of the two debates, but on discerning the motives behind them.⁷ After discerning the motives behind those events, we might find something useful for our today context in Indonesia.

To help the process, there are three questions posed regarding the rise of interreligious religious discourse at the time of 'Abbasid caliphate are these: First, what were the motives of the caliphs who sponsored those religious debates? Second, what was the relation between the motives and the historical events at that time? And finally, a more contemporary question, was it possible to use those experiences as the ground for the improvement of Muslim-Christian relations today?

Pre-Context: The Birth of the Greek Translation Movement

It is not an easy task to find sources regarding the motives that brought about the two debates. Most of the literature talks only about the theological content of the debates but is silent on its *sitz im leben*, the time of al-Mahdi and al-Ma'mun. In addition, there are only a few sources which place these Muslim-Christian discourses in relation to the Greek translation movement. Dimitri Gutas provides a clear analysis of these connections. He links the motives for the debates to their social, political, and cultural contexts. He also

⁵Swanson and Goddard says it happened around 781, Griffith choose the year before 782, and Jacques Waardenburg settles on a time somewhere within al-Mahdi's later years, around 785. See Swanson, p. 248; Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), p. 52. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, p. 47; Jacques Waardenburg, "The Medieval Period: 650-1500," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 42.

⁶Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis," p. 38; Goddard, p. 53.

⁷For an analysis of the discussion between al-Mahdi and Timothy I, see Swanson, p. 248-255; Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis," p. 14-17; and Mingana. For the discussion between Abu Qurra and al-Ma'mun, see Griffith, "The Monk in the Emir's Majlis," h. 38-48. For more detail about Abu Qurra's argumentation, see Sidney H. Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalûm: Theodore Abu Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, eds. Samir Khalil Samir, Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

notes the significance of the Greek translation movement in this period.⁸ For this reason, his book is the primary source informing this paper. Thus, following Gutas's arguments, we begin with al-Manshur's policy and the initiation of the Greek translation movement.

Many sources give al-Ma'mun credit as the champion of the Greek translation movement. He cultivated the movement when he founded the *bayt al-ḥikma* (house of wisdom) as an academic center. Any translations from Greek to Arabic before al-Ma'mun were very few and sporadic, as a result of patronization by some nobles, not arising from a full movement.⁹ But, these theses for the movement lack socio-political perspectives connected to the motives of the caliphs. So, Dimitri Gutas's analysis is better, because it dates the birth of the Greek translation movement to the second caliph, al-Manshur (r. 754-775). Al-Manshur was the influential leader of the early 'Abbasid caliphate and the architect of the strong foundations of the 'Abbasid dynasty. Gutas also supports his theory by noting that much of the literature favoring al-Ma'mun's role in the Greek translation movement was written in al-Ma'mun's own era as a revisionist version of history. These claims were designed to support his political policies.¹⁰

Despite his scintillating victory, al-Manshur had to face enormous challenges facing his new regime. The greatest of these were how to maintain the various people who had had supported him and how to strengthen the foundation for his regime. Dimitri Gutas describes al-Manshur's motives vividly:

It is now becoming increasingly apparent that the way in which the early 'Abbasid caliphs tried to legitimize the rule of their dynasty in the eyes of all the factions in their empire was by expanding their imperial ideology to include the concerns of the "Persian" contingent. This was done by promulgating the view that the 'Abbasid dynasty, in addition to being the descendants of the Prophet and hence satisfying the demands of both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, was at the same time the successor of the ancient imperial dynasties in 'Iraq and Iran, from the Babylonians through the Sasanians, their immediate predecessors. In this way they were able to incorporate Sasanian culture, which was still the dominant culture of large masses of the population east of 'Iraq, into mainstream 'Abbasid culture. Al-Manshur was the architect of this policy.¹¹

Taking Gutas's view, we can conclude that Al-Manshur tried to gain support from the people through two main strategies which he mingled together. Firstly, he tried to build

⁸Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁹For example, see Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: a History in the Middle East* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), p. 63-64; Goddard, p. 52; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: ST. Martin's Press, 1970), p. 309-310; Marshal G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Volume I The Classical Age of Islam (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 298.

¹⁰See Gutas's arguments in Gutas, p. 83-104.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 29.

an image of a good Muslim ruler, painting himself as different from the Umayyad dynasty powers, who had used Arab favoritism. Consequently, al-Manshur, who was supported by many factions, including non-Arabs, upheld the non-discrimination policy already announced by Umar II (r. 717-720) which was not effective in upholding Umar's regime.¹² But when al-Manshur acted as a caliph, this policy was efficacious, creating an egalitarian Islamic society where there was no more Arab favoritism; it also affected the non-Muslim population, which were still the majority at that time.¹³ In addition to this policy, al-Manshur used two other strategies to prove his Islamic inheritance: the Islamic title, which would be utilized by all the 'Abbasid caliphs;¹⁴ and the claim of their bloodline to the Prophet's family, i.e., from al-'Abbas's clan.¹⁵

Equally important to building the image of a good Muslim ruler was al-Manshur's next strategy. He advertized himself as a successor to the Sasanid or Persian dynasty, whose culture still dominated the vast area of the eastern Islamic empire. This territory included some of the most important regions at that time, such as 'Iraq, Iran, Khurasan, and Marw.¹⁶ The factor behind this approach was the decision to move the central authority from Syria to 'Iraq, where Persian culture and language were very influential. This policy was carried out in several ways. Besides the Islamic title of al-Manshur, which literary means 'he who is granted victory [by God]', he also took the Persian's king title for his caliphate, "the shadow of God on earth."¹⁷ Philip K. Hitti says that al-Mansur imitated the Persian way of life in the palace, a model of government system, and Persian ideas and thought.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Hitti misses the fact that al-Manshur embraced Persian culture in order to maintain his power.

The 'Abbasid caliphate came to power after seizing the Umayyad, but this act did not automatically win it allegiance from all factions. The best example of this unsettled state can be found in the civil war between rival factions in the House of Prophet in 'Abbasid's early years. This fractious reality would be repeated several times over the next periods, involving also the 'Alids, who were disgruntled with the 'Abbasid caliphate.¹⁹ These rebellions often mixed together with the trend toward Zoroastrianism revival. Although small in number and easy to pacify, these had enormous followings, and shared those sentiments.

¹²Cragg, p. 60.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴The addition of an Islamic title was new in the history of the caliphate. According to M.A. Shaban, those titles contained "messianic implication[s]....to convince the Shi'a that their demand [about the House of Prophet as the caliph] was being met." M.A. Shaban, *The 'Abbâsîd Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 166.

¹⁵Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 53.

¹⁶Gutas, p. 34-35.

¹⁷Hodgson, p. 280.

¹⁸Philip K. Hitti, p. 294.

¹⁹See M.A. Shaban, p. 163-168; Ira M. Lapidus, p. 64-66; G.E. Von Grunebaum, *Classical Islam: A History 600-1258* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), p. 81-82, 90.

Thus, they could magnify other rebellions.²⁰ Overall, the impetus for the two main strategies was to accommodate and to reconcile rival factions' interests, both political and ideological, and to gain the allegiance of different factions, especially the Persian faction.²¹

Specifically, the Persian factions consisted of, first of all, the Arab tribes that had moved to Khurasan and had merged with the local populations. Second, the Arabs and the Arameans who were Persianized already and had lived there even before the rise of Islam. Furthermore, there were the Persians who had converted to Islam. And finally, the Zoroastrian-Persians were the majority among the Persians at the time of al-Manshur.²² Concerning the Zoroastrian-Persian group, it was natural for other group to embrace their culture, because Zoroastrianism was still very influential among the Persians, even under Muslim rule. The Zoroastrian influence, indeed, was embedded in the Persian culture which al-Manshur adopted, including for examples its astrology and astronomy. Still, this policy was connected to his decision to start the Greek translation into Arabic.²³

Unlike Hitti, who failed to see the relation of Persian culture to the beginning of the Greek translation era under al-Manshur, Gutas shows how the movement was part of the effort to continue the Zoroastrian imperial ideology of the Sasanid Empire.²⁴ First, Greek thought was not new to Islamic society. The majority of the population of the empire was culturally shaped by Greek culture even before Muslims had come to power. Greek thought extensively influenced the Umayyad caliph, because the caliphate tried to mimic the Byzantine dynasty in several ways, including the use of Greek as the official language.²⁵ After coming of Muslim rule in these regions, many Christian places continued to study the Greek thought, since it had not been possible under the Byzantine Empire.²⁶ This was the reason why many Christians played an important role in the Greek transmission of Greek thought by translation into Arabic.²⁷ Thus, Gutas concludes that even if there had been a chance of Greek thought being translated during the Umayyad era, unfortunately, caliphate support was lacking, so Greek translation flourished only at the beginning of the 'Abbasid era. This development can be attributed to 'Abbasid imperial ideology and interests.²⁸ So there was already fertile ground in the empire for the translation movement, and al-Manshur was clever enough to start and cultivate it for his own political purpose.

²⁰Gutas, p. 50.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 28.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³Gutas, p. 33-35.

²⁴For further elaboration, see *Ibid.*, p. 34-45.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 17-19.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 15-16; Goddard, p. 50.

²⁷Many of the translators, even the earliest ones, were Christians who were fluent in Greek and Arabic. For example, Timothy I who was one of the earliest, and Hunayn ibn-Ishâq who translated many works, Goddard, p. 52.

²⁸Gutas, p. 19.

The tradition of translations has long been cultivated in Zoroastrianism, because it holds a belief that all knowledge came from the Avesta.²⁹ The late Sasanid literature has Greek ideas reputedly taken from the Persian, which had been conveyed by Alexander the Great in his conquest.³⁰ Hence, we find the Zoroastrian thought that the beginning of the Greek translation movement in the al-Manshur era was an effort to return it to the “original” sources.³¹ Here, I am arrived at a different conclusion from Gutas who says the Greek translation movement marked a Zoroastrian revivalism in Arabic.³² Al-Manshur was a great politician who knew exactly that his policy must be to satisfy the Persian faction. Still, that was not the only reason for his stance; he needed to calculate the interest of the Muslims, too. His decision to translate Greek thought into Arabic language so make those ideas an integral part of Islamic society, helped place Islam above other traditions, including Zoroastrianism.

Understanding the Contexts, Recognizing the Differences

The two interreligious debates in the era of al-Mahdi and al-Ma'mun were enforced by their own particular contexts, building on the political and cultural groundwork laid by al-Manshur. Moreover, they were juxtaposed with the Greek translation movement.

The translation of *Topic*, the arduous opus of Aristotle, was completed under the instruction of al-Mahdi and became one of the most influential books in Greek literature. According to Gutas, al-Mahdi felt compelled to translate and use the book because of his political need: he had to engage opposing discourses from ideological opponents as they challenged current 'Abbasid imperial ideology.³³ To appreciate these circumstances, it is important to understand that imperial ideology from the previous ruler created an egalitarian Muslim society. It flourished in al-Mahdi's time and caused two important phenomena. Firstly, plenty of non-Arab Muslims filled important positions in the caliphate's regime and, secondly, Islam became a proselytizing religion which triggered massive religious conversions to Islam.³⁴ Instead of bringing advantages, however, this situation also created varied oppositions to al-Mahdi's regime.

Thus, to begin with, according to al-Ahbari documents there are three heretical sects, i.e., Manichaeism, Bardesanism, and Marcionism. Those three threatened the imperial ideology, so al-Mahdi commanded the theologians to engage them in discourses.³⁵ These religious turmoil arose from the adoption of Zoroastrian culture by al-Manshur, and it

²⁹Gutas, p. 44-45.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 36-40.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 41.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 45.

³³Gutas, p. 61-62.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 65.

was very dangerous development, because it could have led to a rebellion.³⁶ Similarly, the increase in Muslim converts challenged Judaism and Christianity to hold their own positions. Thus, it was not surprising that the Christian apologetics literature grew in this era and onward, since they needed to response to this kind of challenging situation.³⁷ In addition, for Christians of that time, the apologetics model of discourse was not new; they had used it to dispute on religious matters with the Chalcedonians, even in public debate.³⁸

Those difficult circumstances forced al-Mahdi to find a way to answer the critics, both from the camp of Persian revivalism and also from the perspectives of Jews and Christians, both of whom had more experience in debate than the Muslims. Soon, al-Mahdi chose to use the *Topic's* method of dialectical discussion, called *gadal*.³⁹ After he had learned it, al-Mahdi invited Timothy I to his palace to test al-Mahdi's own capability at using the *gadal*.⁴⁰ As soon as al-Mahdi saw Timothy I's excellence in debate, he asked the latter to translate that book into Arabic so it could be disseminated more widely.⁴¹ Timothy I, who was surprised by the caliph's humility, accepted al-Mahdi's request to translate the book. This series of events gave success to maintaining al-Mahdi's reign.⁴²

Al-Ma'mun had a different political and cultural situation from that of al-Mahdi. He gained the supremacy of the 'Abbasid after winning the civil war against al-Amin, his sibling, who had the right to sit on the throne. Gutas lists several serious problems threatening al-Ma'mun. First of all, his legitimization crisis was even worse than al-Manshur's. While al-Manshur was successful with his imperial policy, through adopting Persian popular culture and beginning the Greek translation movement, this strategy could not work for al-Ma'mun: it had exhausted its relevancy, because the populations had been absorbed into Islamic culture.⁴³ Second, the imperial policy of openness to all ideologies through the Greek translation movement had a large impact on his regime, because it allowed much opposition to al-Ma'mun, especially from the Shi'i groups.⁴⁴ These occurrences pushed al-Ma'mun to affirm his authority via centralization. He also tried to mingle religious authority and political authority.⁴⁵

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 66-67.

³⁷I agree with Griffith, who says that the purpose of those apologetics was "to prevent conversion to Islam and to show that Christians could answer Muslim challenge to their belief, rather than to convert Muslims to Christianity." See Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalâm," p. 6; Gutas, p. 66.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 66-67.

³⁹Gutas, p. 62, 67.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 67-68.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 75-76.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁵Gutas says that this tendency to hold religious and political authorities was descended

Al-Ma'mun's ideology of centralization was built upon two pillars. The first pillar was Islam as the firm foundation of his reign. And the second was establishing his place as the champion of Islam and upholder of the greatest authority. To support the former pillar, al-Ma'mun took a military expedition into Byzantine's regions to expand the *Dar al-Islam*. Then he used the Greek translation movement, which had been started by his predecessor, as an element of his anti-Byzantine campaign.⁴⁶ His point was that the Muslims are superior to Christians (i.e., the Byzantines), because the Christians had rejected the wisdom of the Greeks, while the Muslims recovered it. Thus, if the Muslims had declined to embrace Greek thought, they would have been no better than the Christians.⁴⁷ Therefore, harsh criticism of Christianity from this era was not intended to apply to all the Christians, but was aimed at the Byzantine Empire only, and was just part of the imperial propaganda. In this case, the Greek translation movement once again became a tool to support the politics of the 'Abbasid ruler.

In order to maintain the latter pillar, al-Ma'mun imposed his authority on all political, military, fiscal, and religious matters. The reach of his influence included a single theological mode of thought, i.e., the Mu'tazilah that using the rational intellect as the highest standard. He gathered a religious aristocracy (the *majlis*) around him for this purpose.⁴⁸ Taking all of these factors into account, then the reason al-Ma'mun supported religious disputation, including the debates between Abu Qurra and religious scholars at his court is clear. Gutas concludes:

The second objective [al-Ma'mun as the sole authority] could be achieved only by divesting the criteria for religious authority from the religious scholar who had reigned supreme until his day and by concentrating them in the person of the caliph who would be supported by an organic intellectual elite; this in turn could be effected only by making the caliph's personal judgment in interpreting the religious texts, based on reason, the ultimate criterion. The caliph could arrive at a judgement, and convince others that it was the proper one, by means of debate and dialectic argumentation; these would be the tools in deciding religious questions and forming a judgement about them, and not the dogmatic statements of religious leaders based on transmitted authority. Hence, al-Ma'mun's policies of encouraging debate and the popularity of dialectic...⁴⁹

Conclusion

The motives behind the Muslim-Christian debates in the period of the early 'Abbasid

from Persian tradition for al-Ma'mûn, to some extent, was influenced by it when he was raised and governed in Khurasan. See *Ibid.*, p. 80-81.

⁴⁶Gutas, p. 82.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 83-95.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 79-83.

⁴⁹Gutas, p. 82.

caliphs are closely intermingled with the contexts of politics, culture, ideology, and society, at those particular times. The forces leading to dialogue were not only religious. They were especially also closely connected to the Greek translation movement that made Greek thought available in the Arabic language. Furthermore, anything sponsored by the caliphs always connected to their interest in maintaining their own authority. This is the similarity between al-Mahdi and al-Ma'mun in sponsoring the debates. Still, there are distinctive motives attached to those two debates, mirroring each particular context of each caliph.

Through the debate between Timothy I and al-Mahdi, the caliph wanted to find the right tool to counter criticism from his ideological opponent, and thus avoid military rebellion. For this purpose, Al-Mahdi invited Timothy I to run a trial of the dialectic disputation method from the book of *Topic*. So the first challenged the second whose expertise in debate was famous. After their exchange, al-Mahdi asked Timothy I to translate the *Topic* so it could become a textbook for learning the dialectic method of disputation.

At the time of al-Ma'mun, the situation of the 'Abbasid caliphate had changed, so al-Ma'mun proposed new imperial ideologies that place himself in the sole of the central authority for all life aspects, including religious matters. As a result, the debate between Abu Qurra and the religious aristocrat at the court of al-Ma'mun can be understood as an act to affirm the policy of caliph's centrality. This event especially was aimed to confirm al-Ma'mun policy imposing the Mu'tazila theology in which reason is the highest measurement. All those types of religious debate were meant to improve the rationalist model of thinking.

Putting all these answers from history together, can the Muslim-Christian discourse from the early 'Abbasid era could help us to improve the Muslim-Christian relations today? In my opinion, the answer is ambiguous. On the one side, the motives behind the debates were not to improve Muslim-Christian relations at that time, but rather to maintain the caliphs' authority. But, on the other side, we cannot deny the great influence the Muslim-Christian discourse had on society at that time. For example, Sidney Griffith explains that Islamic '*ilm al-kalam* was born out of and shaped by these intellectual interactions with Christians at the time of the early 'Abbasid dynasty.⁵⁰ In the same way, the Christians also gained advantages in the development of doctrine and the inculturation of Christianity into an Islamic world.⁵¹ Finally, we cannot imagine our world's civilisation today without the Greek translation movement, which made possible many contributions from people of diverse religious backgrounds, i.e., Christians, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, under the patronage of the early 'Abbasid caliphs.

⁵⁰Griffith, "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalâm," p. 2.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 42.

References

- Cragg, Kenneth. *The Arab Christian: a History in the Middle East*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
- Goddard, Hugh. *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*. Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000.
- Griffith, Sidney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Griffith, Sidney H. "The Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*: Reflections on a Popular Genre of Christian Literary Apologetics in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period." In *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, edited by H. Lazarus-Yafeh, et al., 13-65. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999.
- Griffith, Sidney H. "Faith and Reason in Christian Kalâm: Theodore Abû Qurrah on Discerning the True Religion." In *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, edited by Samir Khalil Samir, Jørgen S. Nielsen, 1-43. Leiden, New York, Köln: E.J. Brill, 1994.
- Gutas, Dimitri. *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd - 4th/8th - 10th Centuries)*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Hitti, Philip K. *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*. New York: ST. Martin's Press, 1970.
- Hodgson, Marshal G. S. *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Volume I The Classical Age of Islam*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Lapidus, Ira M. *A History of Islamic Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Mingana, Alphonse, trans. "Timothy I, Apology for Christianity." The Tertullian Project. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/timothy_i_apology_01_text.htm (accessed November 16, 2011).
- Shaban, M.A. *The Abbasid Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Swanson, Mark N. "The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy." In *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, edited by Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson, David Thomas, 237-256. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006.
- Von Grunebaum, G.E. *Classical Islam: A History 600-1258*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.
- Waardenburg, Jacques. "The Medieval Period: 650-1500." In *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, edited by Jacques Waardenburg, 18-69. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.